

What Will Finally End the Russia-Ukraine War?

By Victor Davis Hanson

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Hello, this is Victor Davis Hanson for The Daily Signal. Ukraine is in the news again. There's been some peace proposals submitted by U.S. President Donald Trump to the international community, apparently. A lot of hysteria, a lot of controversy, whether they were too lax, too strong, too punitive, not punitive enough vis-a-vis Russia. But I thought it would be wise just to review some basic questions, maybe offer a few answers, how we got in this mess in the first place. So, why did Russian President Vladimir Putin invade? Why did he invade Ukraine? Well, he invaded Ukraine because of two reasons.

One, there was no deterrence. He had invaded Ossetia in 2008 during the weakened lame-duck Bush administration and Georgia. In 2014, he felt that President Barack Obama, especially after the hot mic exchange in Seoul, South Korea, in 2012, wouldn't do anything. And he was right. So, he took Crimea and he took the Donbas.

And then in 2022, on Feb. 24, he invaded again. Why? Because there was still that lack of deterrence. President Joe Biden said his reaction would depend on whether it was a major or minor invasion. He'd been very weak on hacking. He said, if you're gonna hack, do not hack particular humanitarian sites. So, Putin, again, correctly thought that the United States and the West in general would not attack.

Next question: Why does he keep fighting?

This has been going on for four years. We don't know what the dead, wounded, and missing—that is, the total casualties—are. It could be over 1.5 million. Russia may have lost a million dead and wounded alone.

So, why is he doing this? He's doing this because he feels that there is a magical DMZ line somewhere where the battlefield is today that he has to get beyond. Because if he doesn't—and every dictator doesn't have sole power, he has to report to certain constituencies, public opinion. But in Putin's case, the Russian military and the Russian oligarchic class.

And if he says to them, “I lost 1.2, 1.3 million Russians, wounded or dead. I destroyed the reputation of the Russian military, and I crashed the Russian economy. And all I got was 60 or 70 miles westward of where we were before Feb. 24, 2022,” that’s not enough. So, he’s trying to push westward.

Most of the peace negotiations and the outlines are clear. We all know what they are. Putin can tell the Russians, his constituencies, “I institutionalized my theft of Crimea and Donbas. I moved westward somewhat. I ensured that Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy and the Ukrainians would not be in NATO.” And Zelenskyy is going to say, “I’m a hero. He wanted the whole country. He only got 10% more than he did when he invaded in 2022. We stopped him, and we’re gonna be in the EU. We may not be in NATO, but we stopped him, and he suffered four times the amount of casualties that we did.” So, they each think they can win. And what is the dispute left about?

Ukraine’s not gonna be in NATO. Putin knows that. All it is, where is the DMZ? Does Putin get to push areas westward that Ukraine, Ukrainians are currently in and fighting successfully and he can’t dislodge, or not? So, that’s what the dispute is over, and the security guarantees.

If Ukraine is not in NATO, how can it defend the next invasion from Russia? Well, it’s the greatest military in Europe right now. It’s battle-hardened. It’s got a huge army. It’s well supplied. Will that continue? Will the EU or NATO continue to arm it? Will the United States back them up in extremis? That’s all. That’s the only two issues: security guarantees and where we draw the DMZ line.

Why does NATO or the West not supply Ukraine to win the war? “I mean, give them Tomahawk missiles,” we’re told. “Give them F-16s. Russia’s on the ropes.” And the reason is that Putin engages in nuclear blusters. He has 6,000 nuclear weapons. So, from time to time, a Russian oligarch, a Russian media host, Putin’s inner circle say, “We’re gonna use a nuclear weapon if you do this or that.” And we recoil. No Tomahawks are willing to use a nuclear weapon. Ninety-eight percent of that is bluff. Two percent may not be a nuclear poker. You can’t take those odds.

So, that is one reason why we have restricted. The other is the MAGA brand.

I mean, there's a base of Donald Trump's support that says, "We don't want forever wars. Don't get involved. We don't want advisers. We don't want anything. We've given \$170 billion. That's enough."

There's realists who say, "We have to think of the geostrategic consequences. We want to play Russia off against China. We don't want them to join. We want to go back to history, Henry Kissinger's paradigm. No better friend are we to Russia than we are to China and vice versa."

There's a lot of people in the United States that may be pro-Putin. They feel, "Wow, you know, he's Christian, he's fighting for the West, no DEI, no trans. He's no more corrupt than Zelenskyy is."

So, I don't know if that is—there is a more sizable constituency, which says that the borders always change over there. This was all part of the Soviet Union. Ukraine was created in 1939, when Josef Stalin ganged up against the West with Adolf Hitler and got what is now Western Ukraine, which used to be, for a thousand years, Christian, Polish-speaking Poland. And it was ethnically cleansed during World War II, and the Soviets never gave it up, and the postwar agreements gave Poland parts of Pomerania and East Prussia in compensation.

As far as the Donbas area, that was an anti-Soviet jurisdictional matter. We'll let Ukraine be semi-autonomous on this border, so they don't have a national liberationist front or something. Crimea—it's been Russian since 1783.

So, a lot of Americans say, "We don't want countries coming in here and discussing our changing borders with Mexico. So, we don't want to get involved at all." I think that's why NATO hasn't used its full powers to defeat Russia, which it could vis-a-vis this proxy.

Why do we support Ukraine? A lot of people say we should support Russia. Well, Ukraine was invaded. Russia wasn't invaded. Russia was the aggressor. We like to support the underdog and Europe. Ukraine is quasi-European. It's corrupt, but it's quasi-European and quasi-Western. Putin is not. Ukraine, if it wins the war, it doesn't want any more territory. If Putin wins the war, he wants to continue going. And Ukraine also is a very capable ally. We don't have any friends in the world that are militarily competent—maybe Israel, maybe Ukraine—outside of some NATO country. So, when we see a country that's defending itself and fighting

heroically against enormous odds, like Israel, we tend to feel we should continue to support it.

Another question, isn't this amoral, feeding Verdun, feeding Stalingrad? There's, you know, are we gonna go all the way to 2 million? The only politician who says it is is Donald Trump. He's complained that it's amoral. He's talked about it in human terms. It is.

So, one side has to win and one side has to lose to stop the carnage, if you can't have a peace. So, what will stop the war? The war will stop if Putin, if we pull out or NATO pulls support from Ukraine, Putin will bury Ukraine and take it all, or it'll take a large swath. That would end the war.

Or, if we continue to give aid to Ukraine and Putin, at some magical point, feels he can't win, and he's removed from office or his autocratic successor feels that they can't win, they might have a negotiation.

Or, as I said at the beginning, if Putin feels that he gets a little bit more westward than the current battle line, and they agree on the other terms, which we reviewed, then he'll probably say, "For now, I got a lot for Russia and we're beyond where the fighting is now. We're westward of that."

All in all, it's a mess, and it's a reminder that when you lose deterrence, wars follow. If you want peace, the Romans said, prepare for war.